

Global policy needed on recycling N-fuel

Japanese support for a global reprocessing and protection policy.

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The U.S. Energy Department announced its Global Nuclear Energy Partnership on Feb. 6, reversing a decades-long policy against reprocessing nuclear fuel. This decision will affect the atoms-for-peace programs of not only Japan but many other countries.

According to the department, the GNEP will promote nuclear power generation inside and outside the United States, which will alleviate problems stemming from the disparities between oil demand and oil supply. To achieve this goal, Washington will revive the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel, which has not been undertaken in the United States since 1979.

New lamps for old

Under the GNEP, countries with nuclear fuel reprocessing technologies, including Japan, Russia and the United States, would take in spent nuclear fuel from countries without such facilities and reprocess the spent fuel into fresh reactor fuel on their behalf. The GNEP would urge countries forwarding fuel for reprocessing to intentionally leave some impurities in the fuel to make it harder for it to be used in the construction of a nuclear weapon.

In short, the partnership would be a grand initiative to establish a global recycling system to separate energy elements--uranium and plutonium--from spent fuel and turn them into new reactor fuel.

Nuclear power plants are very effective in alleviating the energy crisis as well as battling global warming. We support the new U.S. policy and say Japan should cooperate with the partnership in developing a new technology.

The spent nuclear fuel left after the generation of electricity is the main drawback of nuclear power plants. Since the spent fuel contains radioactive waste, the reprocessing or disposal of spent fuel requires the understanding of people living near nuclear facilities as well as a great deal of money.

But if the GNEP were set up, many countries would be relieved of the burden of dealing with spent reactor fuel. If it were to join the partnership, Iran, whose nuclear ambitions are being criticized internationally, would be able to build nuclear power plants without protest from other countries.

Securities must be given

The potential fly in the ointment is that countries with nuclear reprocessing capabilities, including the United States, would gain a hold over the nuclear plants of countries that are dependent on their fuel recycling services.

Russia's recent decision to slash the supply of natural gas to Ukraine has shown the risk of having an energy policy dependent on a particular country.

Such concerns by countries lacking reprocessing technologies must be resolved and newer, more proliferation-resistant reprocessing technologies must be established to realize this initiative.

Japan holds a special position in this regard as the only nonnuclear nation in the world that is approved internationally to reprocess nuclear fuel, a technology it promotes as a national policy.

A recycling plant built in Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture, at a cost of more than 2 trillion yen is scheduled to start a final test run soon using recycled spent reactor fuel. Kyushu Electric Power Co. is working on a scheme to burn a mixture of uranium and plutonium in a plutonium thermal reactor for the first time in Japan as the Saga prefectural governor has given the green light to the project.

If the U.S. initiative is realized, Japan's special position might attract global attention and complaints from the other nonnuclear countries. Japan must achieve nuclear fuel recycling quickly and transmit to the world the fact that it has safe nuclear technology and a strong commitment to the peaceful uses of atomic energy.